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Opening extract from

(Un)arranged Marriage

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Chapter One

'No way! I'm not getting married.'

I was shouting, something that I didn't do often. My oldest brother, Ranjit, had provoked it. I had come home from school and heard him and his wife having sex in their bedroom. I'd ignored them and gone into the kitchen to get myself a bowl of Frosties, but he had come downstairs, mumbling something about exercising, his moustached face all red from exertion. I know that I'd only just turned thirteen at the time but I wasn't a child. Like I didn't know what they were doing up there! It was just embarrassing, that's all. But then, after telling me a complete lie, he started banging on about how I would end up just like him.

'One day, Manjit, you'll be like me. Married to a nice Punjabi girl, thinking about babies.' It would have been all right if his wife, Jas, hadn't walked into the kitchen as he was saying all that stuff to me. They'd only been married for a few months and it was bad enough having to call her phabbi-ji, Punjabi for sister-in-law. Man, all she ever did was giggle. I just ignored them in the end, taking no notice of what Ranjit was saying. I tried not to take much notice of any of my family, full stop!

I hated being called Manjit too. Manny, that's what my name was. Manny. Not Manjit. That was a girl's name. There was this girl called Manjit in my class at school and all my friends teased me about it. Even my teachers called me Manny. If they wanted a reply. My brother knew how much I hated being called that so he made the most of it, the fat, smelly, hairy idiot. And as for being the youngest, well, that brought its own heap of grief too. Every joke seemed to be at my expense, as though one of the only reasons for my existence was to amuse my older brothers. There was Ranjit, who I've already mentioned, and his giggling wife, Jas - and then Bilhar who everyone called Harry. He was sixteen and already engaged to a girl who he had never met before. My parents had shown him a photo of a friend's daughter, caked in make-up and wearing a red sari, and he had said 'yes', just on the strength of that. But then again, that was the way things were in my family. Arranged marriages, preferably as soon as school was finished with.

I had two older sisters, too, both of whom were married with kids of their own. Dalbir, the eldest, was twenty-five and always seemed more like an aunt than a sister. The other one, Balbir, was twenty-one and had just had her first kid, a son. Balbir lived with her in-laws in Gravesend whilst Dalbir lived in Coventry with hers. That's the way it was in most Punjabi families; girls become members of the family they marry into and call their in-laws Mum and Dad. I had never really known either of my sisters because they were so much older than me. I was only six when Dalbir had got married, to an immigrant from India. He'd been working illegally for some uncle in a hosiery sweatshop. Marrying my sister gave him his right to stay in England. In Balbir's case, my old man had made an arrangement with a friend of his, almost like a business agreement, just so that Balbir's husband would be able to stay in England too. Man, the only thing missing was the financial aspect. It was all too weird for me, something I just couldn't understand. How could anyone marry a person they'd never met. How could that work? Not that I'd even ever had a girlfriend up to that point so I was no expert, but still, I just couldn't get to grips with the whole idea.

My parents were odd too. My old dear, my mum, well she was just like a stranger who never spoke to me unless she was asking what I wanted for dinner, or shouting at me for pissing about. She never asked me what I was feeling or what I was thinking or anything like that. At school I'd hear all my mates going on about how their mums had helped with their homework. Mine never even bothered to find out if I did any homework, never mind help me with it. Not that she could have anyway. I don't think that she ever went to school.

And my dad, well, he ran the family with fear. He was always either at work or sitting around, pissed on Teacher's whisky, shouting at everyone. He got angry all the time, maybe at something he'd seen on the TV or some problem at work, or sometimes for no reason at all. I'd never seen him hit my mum or anything like that. With her and my sister-in-law he just shouted a lot which scared them enough anyway. I had seen him hit my brothers

though, whenever they were out of order, which was not that often because they were basically turning into newer versions of him and that was what he wanted all his sons to be.

With me though it was like open season. He'd hit me for asking him too many questions or for daring to say something back to him. One time, he'd clipped me round the head for having a go at Harry, and I had answered back calling him a 'bastard'. I got beaten that day with his old hockey stick that he kept under the stairs and I had to tell everyone at school that I had hurt myself playing football. He hit me all the time, sometimes I reckon just because I was in his range. It was either his fists or his feet or anything hard that came to hand. Not that I was that bothered by it. I mean, he'd been doing it since I was a kid and I just saw it as one of the daily hazards of growing up - trying to avoid getting hit. I did wonder though why he singled me out. Sometimes I thought it was because I was the youngest and other times I really thought that he hated me for some reason, only I was never told what it was. Maybe he could see that I was more influenced by the whole Western culture thing than my brothers had been. He definitely didn't like the fact that my best friend wasn't Asian. Either way, getting hit all the time made me feel an outsider and the feeling just got stronger as I grew older.

We lived on Evington Drive, in an area that was popular with Punjabi families. There were only three bedrooms which meant that I had to move out of my box room and in with Harry when Ranjit got married and his wife moved in with us. Ranjit and Jas got my old room, even though it only just had room for their bed, but that was their problem. They were the ones who had nicked my room from me.

Sharing a room with Harry was like my worst nightmare. He was fat and hairy, and had a horrible habit of leaving his dirty football kit, muddy boots included, all over the place. He only bathed every three days and in the summer the room stank of stale sweat when he'd been lifting weights. At night I used to pretend that he wasn't there by pulling the duvet over myself like a tent and reading by torchlight. Even then he'd throw things at me or call me a poof.

'What you wanna read for, man? Bloody Dickens - what are you, a gorah (white) or something? Read about bloody man's stuff, innit.'

I hated having no privacy, no time to myself that wasn't intruded on by a brother who still found fart jokes incredibly funny. He was so bloody thick, it was like talking to a gorilla sometimes. I hated him. And he'd turn up like a bad smell every time I wanted some peace, no matter where I was - the garden, the garage, wherever. Recently Ranjit and his wife had started doing the same, always around and giggling at each other like kids.

My mum was always in the kitchen, cooking, or watching the Asian channels on Sky in the living room. And Dad? Well, he was a law unto himself, walking round the house like a drunken zombie, belching all the time. To escape, I'd tried locking myself in the bathroom once but only succeeded in getting a smack in the mouth from him for my trouble. I couldn't even do my homework in peace because no-one in my family saw it as being important. They thought that school was a waste of time, like quite a lot of working-class Punjabi families. All they were interested in was trying to earn money and you couldn't do that at school or college. Ranjit and Harry had both got jobs in factories as soon as they left school. It was a wonder that I ever got the high grades that I did - not that anyone in my family cared.

I spent as much time as I could out with my friends. Adrian, my best mate who I'd met at junior school was, as he described himself, 'Black-Jamaican'. I spent most of my time outside the house, with him and some other lads. But mainly Ady. We played football together, for the school and on Sundays for a local youth club team. In school we were always together, meeting up during every break and having a laugh together. To my family Ady might as well have been the devil in disguise. They were always on at me about him, especially my brothers and my old man. I'd be at the front door, just about to escape and my old man would appear, pissed on Teacher's, at the living-room door.

'Come back, Manjit!' he shouted in Punjabi. I always knew what was coming so I'd make a face. 'Where you going?' Often he'd speak in this English-Punjabi hybrid that always made me smirk because it sounded so funny and then - CLIP! - my left ear would be stinging. 'Where are you . . .?'

'Out.' That's all I ever said to him.

'I'm not blind, Manjit, I can see that you are going out. Where to?'

'Just up the road with Ady.'

'Ady? Bloody hell! Why are you always with that kalah (black)?'

And that would be it. I'd go mad because my old man was dissing my best mate. I'd call him a racist, get another clip across the head and then he'd pour out all of his prejudices about black people.

'You see if I'm not right. That kalah will lead you into drugs. I watch the news, boy, I know what these kaleh are bloody doing, taking bastard drugs. Bad society. You'll be stealing and smoking . . .'

I'd get another slap and then storm out of the house, with him swearing after me, shouting, telling me to be back for roti or else. As if he really cared. He would be drunk every night after work and all weekend, even though he pretended not to drink on Sundays. Most nights he would pass out by ten and forget that he wanted to beat me for coming in after I was allowed.

As for all that stuff about stealing and smoking, he knew nothing. In reality it had been me who had led Ady astray. I'd been the one who had started shoplifting at places like Boots and HMV, for deodorants and CDs and stuff. It was so easy that I'd got Ady to come along. We stole lipsticks, hair gel, all kinds of things - to order, selling them on at half-price to other kids at school. It wasn't even that serious. It was more a way of showing off, like smoking. We only did that to get in with the older lads or because we thought, stupidly, that it would impress the girls. I never even liked the taste. I suppose it was all part of growing up - being rebels.

Ady was well chilled out, like nothing ever bothered him or upset him, but in many ways he was also a lot like me. He lived with his mum and dad, who were educated and wanted him to do well at school. His brother was about five years older than us and he was a bit of a weed-dealer. Not much, just a few bits here and there. But Ady wanted to be like him and he had this thing about not doing what his parents wanted. Ady didn't even have a particular reason either; he just liked to play the bad boy which, at that age, was quite a funny thing.

I didn't care what anyone said about him anyway. He was my mate and we did everything together. My early adventures with Ady were a prelude to my future. Like a one-minute trailer to a film - a taste of what was to come.

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